



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Promised Land by Miguel Littin

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when he was by-passed in the awarding of the Order of Lenin.

4. Dawson, Jan, "The Invisible, Indivisible Man: An Interview with Alexander Kluge," *Film Comment*, vol. 10, no. 6 (November-December, 1974).

5. *Op. cit.*

6. Heilman, Robert B., ed., *An Anthology of English Drama Before Shakespeare* (New York, 1967), pp. 23-43.

7. Franklin, Alexander, *Seven Miracle Plays* (London, 1963), pp. 38-52.

8. Purvis, J.S., *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (London, 1971), pp. 45-58.

9. The idea of looking to medieval drama was suggested to me by Gerald Peary.

THE PROMISED LAND

Written and directed by Miguel Littín. Photography: Affonso Beato. Editing: Nelson Rodrigues. Music: Luis Advís and the Inti-Ilumani Group. Distribution: Tricontinental Film Center, P.O. Box 4430, Berkeley, Calif. 94704

"Fresco." "Oratorio." "Epic poem." "Folk canto." Where does a reviewer begin when the author of a film has such a clear headstart on appropriating metaphoric phrases to describe his film? The author in this case is the young Chilean director Miguel Littín, named by Allende on the strength of his first feature, *The Jackal of Nahueltoro*, to head and reorganize the state film enterprise, Chile Films. The film is *The Promised Land*, virtually unique among the products of the New Latin American Cinema in that from its inception it was free of the extreme financial limitations and other practical obstacles which plague film-makers under hostile governments. Only the Cuban film-makers have at their disposal the technical advantages and cooperative environment which Littín and his politically committed group of actors and technicians enjoyed during the filming of *The Promised Land*. Metaphors aside, the results of what was perhaps the most ambitious undertaking in the history of Latin American militant cinema are both impressive and challenging.

Set in the early thirties—a time of severe economic crisis, social tension, and political

turmoil—the film follows an itinerant band of unemployed workers and landless peasants through the magnificent Chilean countryside. Camping on railroad tracks and hilltops, their numbers constantly swelling, they are more and more brusquely driven from towns they pass through along their way. As they wander, one woman recounts a visitation from the Virgin to another and, lo, the Virgin appears to a young man who was listening in on their conversation. A man in a ragged pin-striped suit talks disconnectedly but in great earnest to another about the Mexican and Russian revolutions, about Sandino in Nicaragua and the mine organizer Recabarren in Chile. It is Pin-Stripe (Marcelo Gaete) who suggests the takeover of some uninhabited government lands, but it is the other man, José Duran (Nelson Villagra), who becomes the leader of the group.

The founding of the Palmilla Settlement, the ground clearing, planting, and first harvest follow in rapid and joyful succession, but the disproportionate cost of the manufactured goods which the settlers must bring in from the provincial capital of Huique alerts them to the limitations of their new-found self-sufficiency. Enter a red airplane, harbinger of a new, socialist government, spewing leaflets. The pilot holds forth on the virtues of socialism. José Duran, following his example, leads his men to Huique to take over the provincial government. The Andes have magically shifted to the interior of the country, and only through the intercession of the Virgin del Carmen are they able to surmount the perils of that mythic geography.*

Once occupying the seat of the provincial government, José vacillates. If he threatens and expels the emissaries of the landholding and shopowning oligarchy, he gives a more sympathet-

* The archaic quality of the language here is a tip-off. The sequence in fact reenacts the legendary Andean crossing of the liberator Bernardo O'Higgins. The first shot of the film, an unfinished church, is the Temple of Maipu, the very one which O'Higgins built to the Virgin in gratitude for a successful crossing. It remained unfinished until the present military junta recently decided to complete it.

ic audience to their wives. It is in the local brothel that the male class enemies meet again, and there that the insurrectionists learn that the socialist government which they believed to be in power was in fact overthrown a year before. The sergeant who had previously offered his services to José Duran, is now ordered by the most powerful of the oligarchs to rout the interlopers. In defeat, Duran and his men retreat to their valley. Promptly surrounded by the army and its allies of the Catholic hierarchy, they decide to resist to the death. Scenes of slaughter and destruction are intercut with visions of future victory, and the film ends with the words of Che Guevara: "Of those who did not understand well enough, of those who fell without seeing the dawn, . . . of blind sacrifices with no retribution, the revolution was also made."

The ambitious scope of the film and its technical polish testify to the supportive environment in which it was made, but Littín's stream-of-consciousness account of the filming reveals that in fact the endeavor faced other obstacles, and substantial ones:

And that day we spent more than six hours standing in the water in the middle of the fog and it was fucking cold and naturally in June, July and August the bridges washed out and the roads turned into rivers and Marcelo Gaete said it was just like in García Márquez's stories, you saw cows floating down with water up to their necks and drowned calves too and dogs that were rotting little by little and us isolated in that house that the wind was about to blow away and with the mud up above our knees too and when they said "action" the only one who could stay on his horse was Nelson Villagra (a good rider) and everybody else on the ground, horse and all . . .

. . . and stuck there in the muck with all the *campesinos* madder than anything, with the rain and not being able to shoot you think about the critics those snots who are so cocksure afterwards to judge, determine, criticize, to classify as if you were only making movies, no sir, we make history, marble phrases and the smile of the German journalists as they interview us in the famous valley that was washed out on us three times because of the rain and also coordinate the movements of the plane with the walkie-talkie and Jaime the pilot "calling Pablito, calling Pablito" and Pablo Perelman "I read you" and then nothing but noise because you can't hear a thing . . . and who knows how much that famous sequence cost us? Of course as for being nice it's nice and

naturally we ran out of money and instead of three months we shot seven or more because this thing never ends and every day we add sequences because the bitch grows by itself and you're responsible and it's just that sometimes you feel yourself turning around and around in that damn house with those damn corridors among all those flags guns uniforms saddles plaster angels priests and assistant priests and Arturo Prat's uniform and the Virgin's robes hanging in the gallery and the tremendous effort to go on living every blessed day and having to turn yourself inside out and change and grow.

. . . and the dough ran out and you had to spend many hours in waiting rooms in the banks and you think about putting an acknowledgment in the movie: WE ARE DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO THE BUREAUCRATS FOR GIVING US THE OPPORTUNITY TO SLEEP IN THEIR OFFICE or else, thanks to all the red tape it was possible to think and re-think this film and we owe the end result to bureaucrat So-and-So . . . (but) the only one really interested in cinema was Don Fermin del Real, mayor of Chepica, who isn't a gentleman for nothing and let us invade the town hall and get it all full of mud and horses until the people almost overthrew him.

. . . and somewhere they explain that the story takes place in the thirties but it doesn't matter because it might as well be now and yeah it's impressive to see them drop like massacred pigeons, or really like doves or partridges and what else could we try to present in the movie but the problem of the takeover of power by the proletariat and if we make movies we do it so that it serves the revolution because if not no one could put up with so much.

(from Miguel Littín, "Notas sobre filmación," *Cine cubano* #85/86, translated by Susan Pels and Julianne Burton)

The filming lasted eight months. No film lab in Chile was able to handle the final processing in time, so the film was edited and dubbed in Cuba in order to premiere, by invitation, at the Berlin Festival in the summer of 1973. In the spring of 1974, the Film Department of the Museum of Modern Art and the Lincoln Center Film Society sponsored its first showing in this country as part of their "New Directors/New Films" series. *The Promised Land* was never shown in Chile before the fascist coup of September 13, 1973, and certainly has not been viewed there since. Those involved in the film who remained in Chile have either been imprisoned (the case of Carmen Bueno, the first female lead) or massacred by the military junta (the case of many of the peasants of

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the province of Colchagua, who provided much of the cast and setting for the film).

Despite the execrable political direction which events in Chile subsequently took, the film cannot be understood if viewed only in the context of the aftermath of the brutal destruction of Chile's popular socialist movement. For though the film is forty years distanced in time, it is clearly informed by the most pressing internal problems facing Chile under the Popular Unity government: the problem of popular education and politicization compounded by communications difficulties and false consciousness, the need to decisively expropriate the entrepreneurial and landowning classes, the role of the army and established religion, genuinely collective versus opportunistic and personalist leadership, the need to arm the masses. One of the major strengths of the film is that these themes are not grafted on to the narrative but emerge organically from it. Littín's film conveys the same prophetic clairvoyance as some of Neruda's penultimate poems. "The only solution is implacable dictatorship," intones a rightwing politician at the religious festival with which the film opens. "Pacification. Equilibrium." Two images in particular emerge from the procession: a banner emblazoned with the legend "Patria y Libertad" ("Fatherland and Liberty" was the name of the most prominent rightwing vigilante organization during the Allende years) and a bishop who admonishes from his litter, "Feed the hungry lest they devour ye." Taking a position in

line with the MIR (Movement of the Revolutionary Left), the film offers a critique of *La via chilena*, the Chilean road to socialism with its reluctance to disturb the niceties of the national (read "bourgeois") way of life, especially the Church and the constitution.

On another level—perhaps the least accessible to North American audiences—the film can be viewed as both an appreciation and a critique of popular culture. Narrated as it is by means of folk songs, legendary versions of historical events, religious and secular allegories, *The Promised Land* sets out to reveal the resiliency and resistance as well as the deprivation and mystification which folk culture represents. In the First Manifesto of Popular Unity Film-makers (1970), Littín wrote: "We observe with concern a certain tendency toward picturesqueness at certain levels of Latin American cinema. . . . Let us not exhibit folklore with demagogic pride, with a celebrative attitude. Rather let us exhibit it as a cruel denunciation, as a painful testimony to the level at which the people have been forced to retain their power of artistic creation." Wary of being misinterpreted, he continued, "The future is no doubt with folklore. But by then it will not be necessary to designate it as such since nothing and no one will be able again to paralyze the creative spirit of the people." (*Cine cubano* #66/67, my translation.) Viewed in this light, the film's self-conscious use of mythic motifs and pious symbols of religion and country no longer appears obscure, manipulative, or cynical,

as some viewers have interpreted it. Instead, such techniques are part of an effort to use a traditionally elite consciousness-forming medium (film) to explore and critique those cultural modes which inform the consciousness of the popular classes. The Virgin del Carmen, patron saint of the nation and of the armed forces, appears alternately on the side of the privileged classes and among the members of the dispossessed, as do the flags of the Chilean nation, but in the final sequence she and her court of angels stand firmly behind the oligarchy.

In an interview in a Peruvian film journal, Littín explains his paradoxical use of distancing devices. He seeks participation on an intellectual and critical, not purely emotive, level. The film's moving musical score (by Chilean composer Luis Advis) cannot but involve the spectator emotionally, but other elements and techniques conspire to neutralize this effect. The film vacillates here, or, to put it in a more positive light, operates "dialectically," alternating intense emotional involvement with critical perspective. Planes of historical reality are confused with the mystical and legendary. Several scenes are repeated from varying angles in a manner reminiscent of the Brazilian director Glauber Rocha. (There is perhaps a direct connection here, since Affonso Beato, Rocha's cinematographer on *Antonio das Mortes*, was also the director of photography on this film.) Sequence titles produce another kind of distancing effect, but it is on the audio level that these alienating effects are most concerted. The film is intermittently narrated (in the authentic "country" accent and idiom which is lost on the non-Spanish-speaking viewer) by an old man, survivor of the events which he relates, who appears as a young boy (Chirigua) on the screen. Often the events portrayed are in addition narrated by him in voice-over. Songs are often used, as they were very effectively in the third part of the Cuban film *Lucia*, to spur the action forward. Littín often combines these two audio devices so that what we see on the screen is twice recounted—in prose and in song. There are times (the confrontation between the major and the settlers at the end of the film is a good example) when we can perceive three separate levels of audio

information: the voice of the major presenting his ultimatum, the narrator's aged voice recounting what happened, and, over these, a chorus of voices setting the events to music.

The film frequently takes on a self-consciously allegorical dimension, sometimes in contrast to, sometimes fusing with, the realistic strain of the narrative. On their march to the promised valley, the band comes upon a train, symbolic remnant of the world they are leaving behind. Well-dressed passengers throw food at them and hastily close their windows in disgust. Only the riders in an open boxcar (the petite bourgeoisie as opposed to the haute bourgeoisie of the compartments) greet them kindly. The engineer explains, "This is the end of the line. This is as far as we go," and the camera reveals that the tracks in fact give way to open grassland. The great locomotive which represents the bourgeoisie is not just temporarily stalled, but is in fact going nowhere since it has nowhere to go. Only the engineer deserts the dead-ended vehicle to join the pilgrims.

The film's attempt to portray a mass protagonist is not entirely successful. The female characters are bare and often stereotyped sketches. The ingenuousness of the narrator and his pal, though used as a device to further elucidate the meaning of events, is never rounded into a fuller characterization. We are left with a trio of identifiable males: José Duran, Pin-Stripe, and Juan de Dios, the former train engineer. He is irresponsible and opportunistic, a disruptive force in the settlement. He is the one who returns from a foray into the surrounding area with a herd of what can only be stolen cattle. After the harvest, he takes orders for store-bought goods from each settler. Jose attacks him for cultivating individual consumer interests instead of putting the needs of the entire group foremost. At the mountain crossing, and again in Huique, Juan is the one who, impatient and uncomprehending, challenges José to turn back. Pin-Stripe is the ideologue; it was he who planted the first seeds of socialism in José Duran's mind. Though he successfully organizes neighboring *campesinos* and teaches literacy to the settlers, he is also an incurable drunkard who fails to see the implications of the commercialism promoted by Juan de Dios and who confesses that his claims to

an activist past with the great organizer Recabarren are only fantasies. José is the true activist, the "natural" leader. Yet, indecisive at the crucial moment and maintaining an unfounded faith in the support of the army, he too fails. Incapable of initiating the action required by the historical moment, he can only re-act. Unlike the others, however, José returns as a hero in the popular imagination. In the midst of the apocalyptic final battle scenes, José Duran comes galloping back. National patriot Arturo Prat is there too, brandishing his sword. In repeated sequences, they hand their weapons to Chirigua, soldier of the future generation. Death and rebirth, destruction and regeneration: the film mixes mythic motifs with revolutionary imperatives. "This war is starting now and it will never end!" cries José Duran.

It is at this final point that the politics of the film seem fuzziest. One of the last scenes is a smoke-filled tableau in which Meche, bloodied but now crowned, holds the body of José. The obvious implication of this *pietà* is that José is a Christ figure, martyred to the revolution. Yet through the figure of José the film also proposes a critique of indecisive leadership. Despite the political progress he makes during the film, he falters at the crucial moment. It is as a critique of José's fatal hesitation that Chirigua, halting in his new literacy, reads: "History does not forgive those revolutionaries who vacillate just at the moment when it is possible to seize power." Littín wants both to forgive José and to admonish others, on the verge of making the same error, with his example.

The admonition never reached the Chilean public. Since it never fulfilled its intended function as a "political activator" in the arena for which it was intended, by Littín's own standards it cannot be considered a "revolutionary" film. "The revolutionary work proves itself, in reality, after the fact" if "the spectator is capable of being transformed into an agent in the fight for freedom." In this country, *The Promised Land* will be seen as a beautifully rendered cinematic document, an exotic and somewhat mystifying artifact. In Chile its technical mastery (the long, sweeping pans which unify all of Palmilla, the lateral tracking shots of the corrupt and haughty faces of the oligarchy) would have been fused with the

contextual urgency which informs all militant Third World cinema viewed in its place of origin. What is essentially a critical curiosity here would there have become a weapon in the struggle.

—JULIANNE BURTON

The Peasants of the Second Fortress is a fascinating political documentary, covering the fight of peasants and farmers, from 1966 to 1971, to stop an international jetport from being built on their expropriated land 30 miles north of Tokyo. On other levels, it reveals the strength and weakness of certain physical and psychological tactics that might be of great benefit to the various shards of The Movement in this country, and focuses on the virtue of revolutionary patience, of planting radical seeds that will flower at a later date. On still another level, it is like watching a classic medieval Japanese siege, almost balletic. The fortress of the title refers not only to the makeshift barricades around their property (there are moving shots of old women chaining themselves to the trees), but also to the underground tunnels and living quarters built by the determined peasants under the land the airport wanted. Though the peasants and their Zengakuren student supporters were wiped out in the 1971 above-ground battle recorded in this film, the "underground," in both physical and symbolic terms, still exists, perhaps to spring up again someday to defeat the forces of greed and rapaciousness.

Director Shinsuke Ogawa and cinematographer Masaki Tamura agreed to shoot footage only of what they themselves could see from where they were with their cameras; there are no zoom shots of action elsewhere during the police/peasant-student battle. As a result, they present the audience with a sense of immediacy and personal involvement—so much so that we feel we "know" some of the peasants involved. More significant, perhaps, is Ogawa's willingness to let the camera roll while the peasants sit around and discuss tactics and world-view. Some of the footage is a waste of time in traditional, fast-paced cinema terms, but the remainder is in the best of the *cinéma vérité* tradition: a beautiful depiction of democracy in action as the peasants devise new strategies based on the police violence. It's about a 2½-hour movie—which, to our Western standards, could use some judicious editing—but stick with it: it's alive with the stuff of history and real human drama. Tricontinental Film Center, 244 W. 27th Street, NYC 10001.

—BERNARD WEINER